Uneasiness in culture, or negotiating the sublime distances towards the big Other

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Abstract
This paper engages Slavoj Žižek's thesis that people's integration into a dominant culture requires successfully negotiating certain "distances" towards what Jacques Lacan called the "big Other," that is, a nonexistent locus that subtly guides symbolic rules, conventions, and mandates. My main goal here is to illustrate how Žižek's conceptualizations of distance and the big Other can further our geographical theorizations of culture, especially in terms of Sigmund Freud's notion of the "uneasiness in culture." I explore Žižek's identification of three modes of distanciation towards the big Other—"inherent transgression," "empty gesture," and "fetishistic disavowal," which abound in uneasiness because they are sublime, that is, demarcated by virtuality and unfathomability. I also discuss how the demise of the big Other's authority has produced new spaces of cultural uneasiness that can be usefully understood in terms of increased interactions between everyday microcultures.

1 | INTRODUCTION

A common reproach in the social sciences for using psychoanalysis to study cultural phenomena goes as follows: because psychoanalysis focuses on the psyches of individuals it is theoretically unsound, if not illegitimate to use its methods and concepts to analyze culture. Psychoanalysis, however, regards the psyche as inherently cultural insofar as an individual's psyche is necessarily constituted by other people's words, ideas, values, fears, desires, and so on. In addition, psychoanalysis contends that cultural discourses are more important than individuals insofar as the former produces the latter's desires, anxieties, intentions, and motivations. Yet psychoanalysis does not subscribe to a culturalist theory of the individual. That is to say, psychoanalysis does not entirely reject the notion of the individual. As Joan Copjec (2014, n.p., original emphasis) notes, the psychoanalytic distinction between the individual and culture

_falls within the individual. That is, there is something of the group in every individual, but that something cannot be consciously known by the individual. This something in the individual more than itself is 'the group' or 'some One', something to which one belongs but in which one is not engulfed._

Thus, psychoanalysis dialectically attends to the general and particular cultural forces and structures that comprise an individual's life, especially in terms of the singular ways he or she inhabits language, that is,
particularizes elements of language in speech during analysis. But what exactly is “culture” from a psychoanalytic perspective? How does psychoanalysis conceptualize culture’s scalar dimensions of the general and the particular? And, given the longstanding debates in geography about the ontological status and conceptual value of “culture” (see, e.g., Mitchell, 1995), what can psychoanalysis contribute to current geographical understandings of culture?

The main premise of my paper is that the works of Slavoj Žižek can help tackle the above questions. I argue that Žižek’s conceptualization of “distance” that underpins various modes of relating to what Jacques Lacan called the “big Other”—a nonexistent locus or point of reference that tacitly anchors, mediates, and gives consistency to symbolic rules, conventions, and mandates—can enhance cultural geography’s theorizations of culture, as well incite new research on contemporary and everyday instances of what Sigmund Freud (Freud, 2002) (1930)] called the “uneasiness in culture.” While numerous geographers have already used psychoanalysis to consider various contexts of uneasiness, surprisingly, there are no in-depth studies in geography that directly engage Freud’s specific notion of uneasiness in culture. This is a significant claim to make so let me briefly qualify it. To be sure, one could argue that psychoanalytic geography is all about the theoretical and empirical investigation of the uneasy relationships between individuals and culture. For example, David Sibley (1995) and Robert Wilton (1998) have used Freud’s notion of the “uncanny” (unheimlich) and Julia Kristeva’s notion of “abjection” to consider the organization of social spaces in terms of the anxiety-ridden enforcement of boundaries that distinguish between harmless purity and threatening defilement. Joyce Davidson (2003) has also drawn on object-relations psychoanalysis to consider the gendered dimensions of agoraphobia, that is, the “spatially mediated anxiety [and] the problematic nature of social space” (p. 9). Elizabeth Straughan (2014) has explored the “uncanny in the beauty salon” in terms of feelings of dread that emanate from the material and coemergent spaces of skin and technology. The uncanny is a particular apt concept to consider the strained enlacement of individuals and culture because it pertains to an awkward doubling and dynamic dividing of the liminal spaces between oneself and other people (see also Hook, 2005; Pile, 2001; 2011). While space prevents me from elaborating on the above studies or engaging other valuable studies in psychoanalytic geography on other forms of uneasiness such as anxiety associated with castration (Nast, 2014) or doing ethnographic research (Proudfoot, 2015), it is fair to say that psychoanalytic geographers have yet to fully explore uneasiness in culture in terms of the intersubjective dynamics of maintaining appearances in mundane situations.

The uneasy pressures of keeping up appearances and how it meshes with everyday culture is central to Žižek’s thesis that people’s senses of belonging and integration into a dominant culture requires that they successfully negotiate certain “distances” towards the big Other. My paper illustrates how the various distances towards the big Other, which are demarcated by practicing what Žižek calls “inherent transgression,” “empty gesture,” and “fetishistic disavowal” are uneasy because they abound with sublime virtuality and unfathomability. I also provide a geographical critique of the somewhat grand or monolithic notion of the big Other by highlighting recent theoretical and empirical research in cultural geography and Lacanian studies on the demise of the big Other’s authority and efficiency. I highlight how the decline of the big Other has produced new spaces of cultural uneasiness that can be understood in terms of the increased encounters and interactions between microcultures.

2 | LACANIAN APPROACHES TO CULTURE

Lacanian studies of culture typically foreground the notion of the “symbolic order,” which designates a complex matrix of language and law that gives consistency to people’s identities and social worlds. The symbolic order, which is ultimately comprised of chains of signifiers, provides a regulatory framework for intersubjective relations insofar as its various participants collectively invest in and are represented by its system of signs and values. The symbolic order of a university campus, for example, regulates and generates social relations by categorizing people as undergraduate students, Junior Research Fellows, Professors, teaching assistants, Chairs, research support officers,
Pro-Vice-Chancellors, and so on, which in turn, delimits their interactions, expectations of one another, meetings they can attend, awards they can access, and so on.

Crucially, the symbolic order is dynamic and unstable because it is infested with the obdurate inconsistencies of what Lacan calls the “real,” which refers to the opacity and structural incompleteness of language. Lacanian psychanalysis attends to the disruptions of the real not only just in terms of the wobbliness of language but also in terms of the stultifying repetitions of guilt, anxiety, and violence. On this point, echoing a Freudian approach to culture (which I discuss in greater detail below), Žižek (1991, p. 37) contends that culture “is ultimately ... a reaction to some terrifying, radically inhuman dimension proper to the human condition itself.” From a Lacanian perspective, then, culture defines people's various attempts to “gentrify” or “shield” (Žižek, 1989) themselves from the embarrassing, menacing, and potentially traumatic irruptions of the real. Thus, Žižek (1989, p. 5, original emphasis) argues that “all ‘culture’ is in a way a reaction-formation, an attempt to limit, canalize—to cultivate this imbalance, this traumatic kernel, this radical antagonism.”

The psychoanalytic name for this disturbing inhuman yet human imbalance is the “drive”, which designates how human beings are gripped and dogged by a principle to go “beyond pleasure” because he or she is seemingly able to obtain intense libidinal satisfaction (jouissance) from doing things that are excessive, compulsive, and even harmful. The drive, however, is neither a cultural construct nor a biological instinct. Rather, the drive defines the ways in which the human subject inhabits an uneasy space between biology and culture (see Kingsbury & Pile, 2014, pp. 19–26). As Copjec (1994, p. 209) notes, although the drives “have no existence outside culture—[they] are not cultural. They are, instead, the other of culture and, as such, are not susceptible to its manipulations.”

The tensions between the ways in which the symbolic order colonizes or “mortifies” (to use one of Lacan's favored terms) the bodies and psyches of living beings and the disturbances of the real qua drive that threaten to dissolve people's sense of reality means that no one can easily inhabit or maintain a harmonious relationship with “their” culture. Thus, living in the symbolic order of a given culture requires that people constantly overlook, patch up, and deal with its inconsistencies. As Žižek (1999a, n.p.) remarks,

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\text{Culture as such, in order to establish itself as normal, what appears as normal, involves a whole series of pathological cuts, distortions, and so on .... There is, again, a kind of a Unbehagen, uneasiness: we are out of joint, not at home in culture as such, which means, again, that there is no normal culture. Culture as such has to be interpreted.}
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What is noteworthy about this statement is how it situates pathological disturbances in culture rather than in the individual. Put simply, madness ends up in culture. It is also important to note that Žižek's use of the term “Unbehagen” is a reference to Freud's (1930) book, Das Unbehagen in der Kultur (the original German title for Civilization and Its Discontents), which literally means “the uneasiness in culture.” For Freud, uneasiness refers to a range or an amalgamation of nagging affects and feelings such as guilt, shame, anxiety, and embarrassment that are an unavoidable rather than aberrant consequence of culture. Put differently, we are afflicted by uneasiness not despite of, but precisely because of cultural existence. Returning to Copjec's (2014, n.p., original emphasis) observation of the distinction between the individual and his or her culture:

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\text{For, though the group or the One is bigger than the individual, it figures as a part of the individual. This is a peculiar logic—the part is bigger than that which it is part of—but it is absolutely central to psychoanalysis, which places emphasis on the relations between individuals. A change in these relations alters the group as a whole; so, you see that the part, i.e. the relation, is on the same level as individuals, not above them.}
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One way of understanding this “peculiar logic” that defines the relationship between the individual and the group is in terms of Lacan’s thesis that the structure of subjectivity and intersubjectivity is topological. For Lacan, the spatial coordinates of individuals and the group are not defined by the straightforward Euclidean terms of scale, direction, angle, and so on, but by the loopy topological terms of proximity and neighborhood that fuse together inside–outside and near–far relations. Therefore, from a Lacanian perspective, uneasy affects, and emotions are not located “inside"
our heads as internal psychological states but rather are materially externalized—"out there"—in our socio-spatial relations, practices, and environments. Likewise, our innermost, treasured, and tightly guarded affects and emotions can be extremely alien or outside to us (see Kingsbury, 2007). The topsy-turvy relationality between individuals and the group directly informs Lacan’s notion of the big Other, which is synonymous with the symbolic order and central to Žižek's theorizations of culture.

3 | NEGOTIATING THE SUBLIME DISTANCES TOWARDS THE BIG OTHER

Let me begin my elaboration of the main contours of the “big Other” by way of a personal vignette. During a routine rainy-day bus journey to campus, my umbrella unexpectedly lurched across the aisle and hit a man’s kneecap. He swiftly responded by saying, "sorry." The remark made me feel uneasy because I assumed it was my responsibility to apologize. A series of questions flared up: was my fellow passenger's response sarcastic insofar he was highlighting the absence of my apology? Or was his response an act of kindness insofar as he was apologizing on my behalf? I also wondered whether his response was the renowned Canadian symptom of defusing potential conflict wherein the victim rather than the culprit takes on the task of saying "sorry." In the end, I concluded that much of my uneasiness was borne out of my inability to comfortably situate myself vis-à-vis the big Other: a symbolic point of reference that "tacitly steers both cognition and comportment" (Johnston, 2008, p.113) in terms of the written and unwritten rules, rituals, and commitments, which in turn mediate our encounters and relationships with other people (what Lacan designates as “small others”). From a Lacanian perspective, we are never fully in control of our speech, thoughts, and actions insofar we are “spoken for” by this fictitious and impersonal big Other. As Žižek (2005, p.367) puts it, the big Other is

*a set of unwritten rules that effectively regulate our speech and acts, the ultimate guarantee of Truth to which we have to refer even when lying or trying to deceive our partners in communication, precisely in order to be successful in our deceit.*

Furthermore, according to Žižek (2006a, p. 41), we are never merely individuals who interact with other individuals insofar as the big Other is the "uncanny subject who is not simply another human being, but the Third, the subject who stands above the interaction of real human individuals." Lacan's examples of the big Other, which also designate radical alterity, include God, language, and the psychoanalyst qua the "subject supposed to know." While the big Other is powerful insofar as it regulates social interactions, it is neither imperious nor monolithic. That is to say, the big Other neither satiates our desires nor determines our actions. Why? Because the big Other does not exist and is lacking. Regarding its ontological status, the big Other has a reflexive and fragile quasi-transcendental nature and exists only insofar as people act as if it exists. As Žižek (2012 p.185, emphasis in original) puts it, "the status of the big Other is purely virtual, as an ideal structure of reference; that is, it exists only as the subject's presupposition." Regarding lack, the big Other is structurally incomplete or "barred" (to use Lacan's term) because language is not a complete or "closed" system. That is to say, the signifying practices of speaking, reading, writing, and listening are profoundly murky affairs that frequently misfire and lead to mix-ups (Kingsbury, 2015). For Mladen Dolar (2012, n.p.), the big Other is Other not because of its structure but "because of the bug [the unconscious] that keeps derailing it. The bug is the anomaly of the Other, its face of inconsistency, that which defies regularity and law."

The big Other is a particularly useful concept for cultural geography because it is inherently spatial. In his early teachings, Lacan (1993, p.274) stated that the big Other is always "placed at a certain distance" and designates "the locus in which speech is constituted." Žižek's numerous renderings of the big Other, which are scattered throughout his almost three decades-long oeuvre, similarly uses notions of "place," "locus," "distance," and "distantiation." Here, Žižek's argument is that in order for people to integrate themselves into and belong to a dominant culture, they must successfully practice various modes of distantiation towards the big Other. As Žižek (2002, p. xi) writes, "we are 'in', integrated into a culture, perceived by members as 'one of us', only when we succeed in practicing this unfathomable
distance from the symbolic rules—ultimately, it is only this distance which proclaims our identity, our belonging to the culture in question."

The processes of integrating oneself into a dominant culture can be understood in terms of what I call the "sublime distances" of the big Other, which refers to the various ways people deal with "the traumatic emptiness, the primordial lack, residing at the heart of all forms of symbolization" (Shaw, 2006, p.138). By aligning distance with the "sublime," I follow Žižek's characterization of sublimity that eschews the traditional Kantian terms of phenomena that are boundless, transcendent, and awe-inspiring in favor of the Hegelian and Lacanian terms that emphasize phenomena that are empty, unfathomable, and marked by negativity in terms of the impossible, unwritten, and unspoken. In the following sections, I explore Žižek's writings on three main ways of negotiating the sublime distances towards the big Other via the spatial practices of inherent transgression, the empty gesture, and fetishistic disavowal. Sublime distances involve navigating the uneasy inconsistencies and disruptions that permeate our everyday cultural exchanges and performances. I also discuss how this uneasiness has become intensified and proliferated by the decline of the big Other's authority and rise in increased encounters between everyday microcultures, especially in localized urban, mobile, and digital spaces.

3.1 | Inherent transgression

The first way of negotiating the distance towards the big Other is through inherent transgression. This practice involves following implicit unwritten rules that tell us when it is okay or even necessary to break explicit and official rules. Inherent transgression is a form of ideological inscription that is central to the maintenance of numerous social bonds, especially those that comprise institutions, bureaucracies, and communities. Žižek suggests that newcomers to a given cultural space such as immigrants, foreigners, and refugees who are too heedful or dogged in their pursuit of upholding public rules will likely become marginalized or even excluded if they fail to appreciate the degree to which transgressive rituals hold a community together. As Žižek (2006b, p. 28, original emphasis) writes:

*The deepest identification that holds a community together is not so much an identification with the Law that regulates its 'normal' everyday rhythms, but rather identification with the specific form of transgression of the Law, of its suspension (in psychoanalytic terms, with the specific form of enjoyment).*

Žižek's widely cited example of inherent transgression is the so-called Code Red rule of the US marines (popularized in Rob Reiner's film *A Few Good Men* (1992)) that mandates the clandestine nighttime assaults of any fellow Marine who breaks an "ethical" convention of the group. Though officially "illegal," the Code Red strengthens the cohesion and group identification of the military community. Although Code Red "must remain under cover of night, unacknowledged, unutterable" (Žižek, 1994, p.54) and thus something that does not officially exist, obedience to this unwritten law generates strong libidinal bonds among its participants (see also Shaw, Powell, & De La Ossa, 2014). Self-censorship, then, which carries with it the sublime enigma of something hidden among its participants, is a major feature of inherent transgression.

Elsewhere in his writings, Žižek argues that Ku Klux Klan lynching, the sexual abuses of children by Catholic priests, and the rape and murder of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib are not exceptional aberrations or traitorous acts but rather violent outbursts of an "obscene underside" (related to the superego's harsh injunction to "Enjoy!") that serves to supplement and support the "normal" public functioning of such contexts (cf. Nast, 2000). It follows, then, that resistance and rebellion against these domains are already underwritten or "pre-inscribed (i.e. inherent) as a necessary condition of the big Other and ideological integration itself" (Evans, 2014, p. 138). For Žižek, the most effective way to dismantle and break away from the alluring grip of the big Other's "forced choices or available transgressions" (Evans, 2014, p. 138) is to embrace what Lacan calls an "Act": doing something that is ethical, very new, and potentially catastrophic insofar as it radically suspends, reveals, and reconfigures the fundamental coordinates (i.e., the inconsistencies and impasses) of a given symbolic space (see Aitken, 2016).
Much of the literature on the geographies of institutions such as workplaces, prisons, hospitals, corporations, schools, universities, sports clubs, places of worship, military organizations, and so on draws on poststructural theories, especially the works of Michel Foucault to emphasize the productive aspects of power in terms of the spatial practices of control, surveillance, and the regulations of bodies (Billo & Mountz, 2016). There is, however, an as yet untapped theoretical literature on Žižekian approaches to institutional power (see, e.g., Dolar, 1998, Vighi & Feldner, 2007) that brings to the fore conscious and unconscious practices of inherent transgression wherein the unwritten rules of belief, pretense, and self-censorship generate strong and sometimes violent libidinal bonds among its participants. Such dynamics comprise the deferential institutional cultures of, for example, Penn State University, certain English football clubs, and the BBC that contributed to child sex abuse scandals. Cultural geographers, then, would do well to attend to the ways in which inherent transgression is not only about how (from a Foucauldian perspective) resistance is immanent to and generative of institutional power but also how it is “its very disavowed foundation, its ‘constitutive crime’, its founding gesture which has to remain invisible if power is to function normally” (Žižek, 1997, pp. 26–27).

Another rich empirical context for future research on the cultural geographies of inherent transgression are Internet subcultures, social media, and smart device practices, which bring to the fore “anxieties of control” (Leszczynski, 2015) and the “obscene” textual practices of spamming and trolling (Burnham, 2014). Of particular relevance here is the extent to which everyday culture is mass mediated by digital communication via, for example, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, phone texting, and so on. Today’s online mediascape has recast the ways in which subjects situate themselves vis-à-vis the big Other’s written and unwritten rules. With the arrival of multichannel digital television, gone are the days (in 1986 to be precise) when more than a half of the UK’s population would tune in to watch a Christmas episode of EastEnders. The massive surge in popularity of handheld devices, which stream personalized newsfeeds, social media, photo-sharing websites, has in many ways scattered the big Other’s efficacy and incited new forms of uneasiness. A recent BBC news story offers a useful example of the uneasy consequences of the digital dissemination of the big Other in terms of uncertainty about what we should do and say to adults and children who use mobile devices to conspicuously consume (visually and perhaps audibly) hardcore pornography in places such as “planes, trains and McDonald’s.”¹ Such uneasiness is produced not only by the external manifestation of personal or private content in the midst of an impersonal public space but also by the lack of the big Other’s authoritative gaze that would help orient negotiations over a questionable practice. As “Annie G, UK” states, “countless times I’ve witnessed this on the train, there’s been no hope of anyone in authority sorting it out.” The Lacanian twist to the inherent transgression, however, is that taking the position of authority by lodging a complaint against an unlawful and distasteful act risks being “called out ... a prude” and “antimen, antisex or antiporn.” Another example of inherent transgression, which always seems to incite heated debates in my cultural geography undergraduate class tutorial on “visual cultures,” is smartphone etiquette. The main talking point here is not about the dangerous consequences of breaking cultural rules (e.g., secretly checking Wikipedia to answer a pub quiz question), but rather, about the extent to which transgression supports the social enjoyment itself. Exemplary here is “The Phone Stack” game wherein the first diner who is unable to refrain from checking their smartphone, which is placed in a stack with other devices in the middle of the table, must pay for the entire meal.

3.2 The empty gesture

According to Žižek (1997, p. 27), an empty gesture is “an offer—which is meant to be rejected: what the empty gesture offers is the opportunity to choose the impossible, that which inevitably will not happen.” One of Žižek’s (1997, p. 28) notable examples of an empty gesture is as follows:

> when, after being engaged in fierce competition for a promotion with my closest friend, I win, the proper thing to do is to offer to withdraw, so that he will get the promotion, and the proper thing for him to do is to reject my offer—this way, perhaps, our friendship can be saved ... What we have here is the symbolic exchange at its purest: a gesture made to be rejected; the point, the ‘magic’ of the symbolic
exchange, is that although in the end we are back where we were at the beginning, the overall result of the operation is not zero but a distinct gain for both parties, the pact of solidarity.

Žižek suggests that it would be devastating for both parties if the empty gesture of offering to withdraw from the job promotion were in fact to be accepted because it would disintegrate “the semblance (of freedom) that pertains to the social order” (ibid.). In other words, accepting the empty gesture fails to posit the existence of the big Other and results in the dissolution of the symbolic space. What I find so appealing about this example is its simple illustration of how a mundane scenario (in this case a competition between friends for something that is mutually desirable) can suddenly irrupt into uneasiness (e.g., rivalry and jealousy) and prompt tricky symbolic negotiation. The precarious dance of empty gestures abounds in contexts such as gift exchanges, paying for meals, and accepting or turning down various forms of invitation wherein our brief declarations of “oh, you shouldn't have done that” and “no, no, no! Come on, let me pay, it's my turn” are (usually) swiftly rejected. I expect most readers of this journal are more than familiar with the importance of empty gestures for oiling job interviews, conference sessions, and qualitative fieldwork such as participant observation. The empty gestures of shaking hands, saying “how are you?” or “please, let me know if there is anything I can do” are key ingredients for navigating the expectations that underpin our exchanges with friends, family members, neighbors, coworkers, and the many strangers in public spaces.

Echoing my vignette about an uneasy encounter on a bus, the liminal spaces of mobility—buses and bus stops, planes and airports, trains and train stations, lobbies and elevators and so on—are prominent sites to conduct research on people's experiences of uneasiness and their various attempts to deal with uneasy feelings such as commuter stress (Bissell, 2014) and anxiety whilst traveling in foreign environments (Kingsbury, Crooks, Snyder, Johnston, & Adams, 2012). Much of my inability to comfortably relate to the big Other on the bus was the result of finding myself in a new cultural space. I had recently moved from a small college town in rural Ohio to Vancouver, which was the largest city I had ever lived in. Relatedly, are the public spaces of “everyday multiculture” (Lobo, 2014) that include parks, cafés, malls, markets, shops, beaches, streets, condo tower lobbies, community centers, and playgrounds that spatially concentrate different kinds of bodies (for example, migrant, native, refugee, and white) and cultural sensibilities defined along the axes of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on. A Žižekian approach to the uneasiness in these intercultural sites of encounter or what Mary Louis Pratt (1991) called “contact zones,” which involve people “rubbing along with unknown others” (Watson, 2006, p. 156), could inquire into how the empty gestures of everyday conduct and etiquette underpin people's attempts to avoid hurting one another's feelings or defending themselves against uneasy encounters with different kinds of people. Also significant are the ways in which newcomers to cultural groups must quickly adapt (or give the impression of trying to adapt) to and become adept at using new symbolic practices like the empty gesture in order to avoid isolation or ostracism. One example is the extent to which state sponsored programs of Syrian refugees in Canada involve teaching appropriate identifications with holidays such as Christmas, which abound in the empty gestures of saying “happy holidays,” sending Christmas cards, and accepting presents from numerous mall-based Santa Clauses, and so on.

Žižek suggests that an underappreciation of the importance of empty gestures is even indicative of a sociopathic attitude. As Žižek (2006a, p. 13) writes:

The notion of the social link established through empty gestures enables us to define in a precise way the figure of sociopath: what is beyond the sociopath's grasp is the fact that ‘many human acts are performed ... for the sake of the interaction itself' [Morton, 2004, p. 51]. In other words, the sociopath's use of language paradoxically matches the standard commonsense notion of language as a purely instrumental means of communication, as signs that transmit meanings. He uses language, he is not caught into it, and he is insensitive to the performative dimension.

Žižek continues by suggesting that the performative dimension of the empty gesture means:

every choice we confront in language is a meta-choice, that is to say, a choice of choice itself, a choice that affects and changes the very coordinates of my choosing. Recall the everyday situation in which my (sexual,
political, or financial) partner wants me to strike a deal; what he tells me is basically: ‘Please, I really love you. If we get it together here, I will be totally dedicated to you! But beware! If you reject me, I may lose control and make your life a misery!’ The catch here, of course, it that I am not simply confronted with a clear choice: the second part of the message undermines the first part—somebody who is ready to damage me if I say no to him cannot really love me and be devoted to my happiness, as he claims.

I quote Žižek’s statement at length here because it nicely highlights the Lacanian emphasis on how individual symbolic gestures are always entangled in the processes of collective practices, that is, caught up in navigating the distances towards the big Other. In addition, the above passage alerts us to the danger of dismissing empty gestures as fake or insincere. Rather, empty gestures are important because their discursive toing and froing of offering something that should be politely declined posits the existence of the big Other and thus constitutes a key element of the symbolic texture of everyday social bonds.

### 3.3 Fetishistic disavowal

A third way of negotiating the distances towards big Other is fetishistic disavowal. Žižek (1989) introduces this notion early on in his work in order to advance a Lacanian reconceptualization of ideology. For Žižek, modern ideology no longer operates primarily through people’s ignorance of social conditions of power (as expressed by the Marxian formula “they do not know it, but they are doing it”) but through the widespread adoption of a “cynical distance” (Žižek, 1989, p. 33) toward the prevailing ideology or big Other. Such an attitude, which is nonetheless still thoroughly ideological, can be formulated as follows: “they know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know” (Žižek, 1989, p. 32). Fetishistic disavowal relates to the big Other in terms of a denial of our complicity and participation in prevailing systems of ideology and power. Here, people acknowledge the lack in the big Other (e.g., the corruption of public figures and organizations), but they continue to act as if the lack does not affect them. Žižek (2000, p. 256) offers a neat example of fetishistic disavowal in terms of the following scenario:

> What is symptomatic about Titanic is the multitude of disavowals, of denials of the threatening attraction of the film, in intellectual circles. The excuses to which intellectuals refer to justify their seeing the film range from ‘I did it because I have to accompany my children’ through ‘I was only interested by the spectacular technical effects’ up to ‘it’s bad, but not as bad as it might have been’; all this, of course is supplemented by the rejection of seeing the film (‘I do not want to spend time seeing such trash!’), in which it is easy to discern the fear that one might be seduced into actually liking the film.

The above example is also useful because it illustrates how empty gestures can be mediated by gender (the enjoyment Titanic might pose the threat of emasculation) and age (watching Titanic was a parental duty). Žižek also suggests that fetishistic disavowal is key element of the paradoxical status of belief and the big Other. A notable example in Žižek’s writings is the reference to the Danish nuclear physicist Niels Bohr who, having heard someone scorn a horseshoe on his front door, “snapped back: ‘I don’t believe in it either; I have it there because I was told that it works even if one doesn’t believe in it’ “ (Žižek, 2006c, p.353). Similarly, Žižek uses the anecdote of a woman who was convinced the street number of her home was bringing her bad luck and asked an incumbent political candidate (who was standing for re-election in Slovenia) if he would be able to help lobby the local authorities to change it. Rejecting the candidate’s suggestion that she simply change the number tile or paint on a small additional letter “A,” she replied that she had already done this but it still didn’t work because “you can’t cheat it, it has to be done properly, with the relevant state institution’. The ‘it’ which cannot be duped in this way is the Lacanian big Other, the symbolic institution” (Žižek, 1999b, p. 326).

Here, I am reminded of how faith in the big Other can be materially externalized in the built environment via the superstitious practice of “tetraphobia” in downtown Vancouver (like other cities and neighborhoods with significant numbers of Chinese and East Asian residents or potential buyers) that omits the number four in the designation of
suite and floor numbers in high-rise towers because the number “four” in Mandarin and Cantonese (pinyin sì) sounds similar to the word “death” or “decease” (pinyin si). Vancouver’s real estate—one of the most expensive markets in the world—elicits numerous fetishistic disavowals when first-time buyers openly admitted that they knew very well and openly talked about the “insanity” of the market prices, but even so, they had to at least try and “get in” the market before it was “too late.” During the several years that I lived in one of these downtown high-rise towers, I witnessed daily instances of fetishistic disavowal in terms of negotiating “Strata Bylaws and Rules”: Vancouver’s main form of property law that regulates common property and individually owned lots in multilevel housing. Fetishistic disavowal is central to the ways in which residents routinely apologized to one another by saying things like—“Erm, I’m so sorry, but I need to do this because ...” or, in the case of dog owners, “Oops, I know this is a bit naughty, but you know, he really needs to go”—as they encountered one another breaking various Strata rules such as allowing their dogs to run off leash on courtyard grass, sneaking live cut Christmas trees (prohibited by Strata because they are fire hazards) into the building, bringing muddy bicycles into elevators, and so on. Crucial here is how members of the building’s concierge service, who are supposed to uphold, document, and report any bylaw violations to the Strata council, would regularly defer to the rules of disavowal in order to distance themselves from the limitations of Strata rules and maintain friendly relations with residents. For example, concierge staff overlooked minor infringements such as young children rollerblading across lobby floors or ignore early morning commuters hurriedly dumping food waste bags in a nearby dumpster rather than taking them to a faraway food scraps disposal bin.

The rise of Strata Councils, alongside other property ownership associations around the world, echoes Žižek’s (1999b, p.332) observation of the late capitalist and postmodern “sprouting of ‘committees’ destined to decide upon the so-called dilemmas which crop up when technological developments ever-increasingly affect our life world.” These committees or “substitute small big Others” (Žižek, 1999b, p. 334), which are associated with cyberspace, medicine, biogenics, the rules of sexual conduct, and the protection of human rights, “confront us with the need to invent the basic rules of proper ethical conduct, since we lack any form of big Other, any symbolic point of reference that would serve as a safe and unproblematic moral anchor” (Žižek, 1999b, p. 332).

4 | CONCLUSION

This paper provides an introduction to Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian conceptualizations of culture in terms of his notions of “distance” and “the big Other.” I have argued that these notions, which are inherently spatial, can enhance cultural geographers’ understandings of culture, particularly in terms of what Freud’s called “the uneasiness in culture.” From this perspective, uneasiness is not an unfortunate by-product of culture but inherent to culture as such. Uneasy feelings of paranoia, uncertainty, and guilt permeate Žižek’s delineation of three modes of distanciation towards the big Other—“inherent transgression,” “empty gesture,” and “fetishistic disavowal”—because they are underpinned by sublime virtuality and unfathomability. I have also suggested that such uneasiness is intensified by the demise of the big Other’s authority and increased interactions between microcultures. A key concern in my paper has been to illustrate how such instances are concretized in people’s everyday lives. What I find so appealing about Lacanian theory is its uncanny applicability for making sense of the concrete minutaie that both plague and dignify our everyday habits and worlds.

To conclude, let me very briefly acknowledge the historical dimension of the big Other. Researchers (including Žižek himself) frequently associate the erosion of people’s belief in the big Other with emergence of postmodernism, multiculturalism, and neoliberal capitalism. It seems to me that the sprouting of the small big Others is a key factor in the recent rise of populist nationalism across Europe and the United States, which has (so far) ushered in the Brexit vote to leave the European Union in the U.K. and the election of a U.S. President who has never held a public office position. Surely, then, the present conjuncture provides a rich if not an urgent occasion for cultural geographers to avail themselves of Žižek’s insights into how the big Other and small big Others might code and conduct “the infra-ordinary—the micro-neurotic, the zero degree of behaviour’ (Keegan, 2002, p. ix) that comprises the functioning of “normal” cultures around the world.
NOTE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
I thank the two anonymous reviewers for helping me greatly improve the structure and argument of my paper. I am also grateful to Katy Bennett for her editorial support and guidance.

REFERENCES


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**How to cite this article:** Kingsbury P. Uneasiness in culture, or negotiating the sublime distances towards the big Other. Geography Compass. 2017;11:e12316. [https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12316](https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12316)